

research snapshot

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Slavery Still Exists in Modern Business

What is this research about?

Slavery is not just a crime of the past; rather, it persists as a management practice in modern business. In 2009, the US Department of Labor found about 50 products that were made using forced labour across 29 countries. Even in the US, between 50000 to 150000 people are currently enslaved. The most well-known cases of modern slavery are in the cocoa industry of West Africa, the cotton industry in Uzbekistan, and the agriculture industry in Spain. This research is about the role of companies and managers in slavery and what enables them to sustain the use of slave labour.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher looked at existing studies regarding human exploitation, from a management perspective. He set out to define the conditions of modern slavery. He also produced a model that specifies the factors which make it possible for slavery to exist today in various forms in modern business.

What you need to know:

Slavery is not over; and even though society condemns it, slave labour continues to be used in various companies around the world. Understanding the factors that enable slavery will help formulate solutions.

What did the researcher find?

The researcher defined modern slavery by the following situations:

- Forced work through threat.
- Ownership and control of a person through abuse.
- Dehumanization and treating a person like a commodity.
- Restriction of a person's freedom of movement.
- Exploiting a person through underpayment.

The following conditions lead to a greater likelihood that enterprises will adopt slavery:

- Industries that have high demand for labour such as agriculture, and industries with low legitimacy such as sex work or unauthorized mining.

- Poverty, unemployment and lack of education can enable slavery.
- Enterprises in isolated locations that are not in contact with communities are able to avoid law enforcement and support groups who could prevent slavery.
- Cultural traditions that promote slavery (e.g. the caste system in India, or hill tribes in Thailand).
- High corruption, low regulation and weak governance.

There are several reasons for how the use of slavery as a management practice is maintained. Workers do not willingly become slaves, but in many cases slavery is enforced through indebtedness. It often begins with a financial loan, for which the lender asks for a much higher amount in repayment. That way the worker would never be able to repay the loan, and has to resort to being a slave. False or unclear accounting reports are used to make workers believe that they are in deep debt. Violence is also used to enforce slavery. The people involved in the supply network of slaves foster trust and co-operation and bribe public officials to hide their activity from outsiders. Due to these methods of sustaining slavery, modern slavery continues to exist as one of the worst forms of human exploitation.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers in government and civil society may use this research to focus their attention on strength of governance, poverty, education, unemployment and inequality. Enforcing a code of conduct in companies that prohibit slave labour can also help end modern slavery. Further research should look into solutions and methods to prevent the issue of slave labour.

About the Researcher

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